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ABSTRACT

The individual responsible for spearheading reform for the education of limited-English-proficient (LEP) students in Linda Vista Elementary School (San Diego, California) describes the process, issues, and outcomes of the initiative in this theme issue. Linda Vista Elementary School has a student population that is 77 percent LEP. The personalized account both describes the practices implemented at the school and outlines parameters for reform efforts in other schools serving linguistically and culturally diverse students. After an introductory section giving background information on current reform issues, sections describe the specific context for reform at Linda Vista, define pedagogical premises that apply to programs for LEP students, and identify practices at Linda Vista that underwent reform. These include practices in the areas of decision-making (governance), teaching and learning, administrative organization, and assessment and accountability. Specific examples of each are cited. Contains 17 references. (MSE)

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LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY AND REFORM: CAN PRACTICES BE IDENTIFIED?

by Adel Nadeau, Humanities Director, San Diego Unified School District

A nationwide study of school reform and student diversity, funded through the U.S. Department of Education, identified Linda Vista Elementary School as one among eight schools with an exemplary learning environment for limited English proficient (LEP) students (Berman, et.al., 1995). This learning environment came about through the concerted efforts of the Linda Vista staff and principal, who provided the leadership and vision necessary for sustained schoolwide reform.

The following discussion is written from the perspective of the person responsible for spearheading Linda Vista's reform. In reflecting upon her experiences with reform in a school with a student population 77 percent limited-English proficient, Dr. Adel Nadeau, former principal of Linda Vista, provides both a personalized account of practices implemented at Linda Vista and parameters for the reform efforts of other schools serving linguistically and culturally diverse students. The discussion serves as a valuable commentary in its own right as well as complementing the information on Linda Vista in *School Reform and Student Diversity: Case Studies of Exemplary Practices for LEP Students*, a report which describes the eight schools selected in the nationwide study of exemplary programs serving LEP students. This report and related documents may be found at <http://www.ncbe.gwu.edu>.

Introduction

The current reform movement in American education is more than a passing fad. It represents a major transition in thinking about the formal education of *all* students. In describing the process of education reform, Victoria Bernhardt (1994) states: "Schools' staffs must understand from the beginning that major elements (for reform) are internal rather than external, requiring a transformation of all individuals' thinking about school, students, teaching, and learning." Within this context, the language of education reform, expressed by words such as "bottom up," "continuous progress," "collaboration," "inclusion," "vision," and "commitment," begins to take on a new meaning, one premised on individual empowerment and a shared vision of and commitment to the academic achievement of all students. This represents a dramatic paradigm shift in the management and delivery of public education services in the United States.

We are now, however, in the perplexing stage of devising implementation strategies. Of particular concern is the identification of those practices of reform that result in success for poor students, those at risk, and those with linguistic differences. Although a strong research

base has been established on effective practices for linguistically and culturally diverse (LCD) students (Garcia, 1988, 1991), this knowledge does not appear to have been integrated into the reform agenda. In a discussion paper entitled, *For all students: Limited-English proficient students and Goals 2000* (August, Hakuta, and Pompa, 1994), the authors identify issues related to the inclusion of LEP students in the reform effort, issues such as the need for academic standards that address primary and secondary language development, assessment of and accountability for LEP students, and equitable organizational structures. Their discussion points to the need for the reform process to incorporate these and other key variables that specifically relate to the instruction of language minority students.

The majority of studies on school reform, however, do not include issues related to language minority students (Gandara, 1994; Valdez, 1989; Zehler et al., 1994). In a literature review on institutional change and services to limited English proficient students, Zehler et al. (1994) found that typically there is an assumption about the "universal" teacher and the "universal" student. The implication of this finding is that language acquisition and dual language instruction research have not entered the reform picture--that the "universal" connotation assumes an overriding solution inherent in the innovations, without attention to research and practical wisdom related to issues of second language acquisition and bilingualism.

In contrast to this overriding solution which glosses over the needs of the language minority student, this paper draws on the author's experiences leading a major school reform effort in an urban elementary school with a large limited English proficient student population. The discussion provides insight into successful reform practices premised on the language and academic needs of limited English proficient students. The context for reform as it existed at the author's school is presented first. Pedagogical premises that apply to programs for limited English proficient (LEP) students are outlined next, followed by the reform practices. The intersecting factors of effective programming for LEP students and reform practices are presented from the perspective of the author's experience with the reform effort. Concrete examples of the reform practices are given as well as decision-making strategies that can lead to effective schoolwide reform and success for all students. Finally, recommendations are made and conclusions drawn that focus on decision-making strategies, schoolwide accountability, and the processes that constitute meaningful reform for a culturally and linguistically diverse student population.



Context for Reform

Before becoming Principal in Residence at the U.S. Department of Education from September 1994 to May 1995, the author spent seven years as principal leading a successful and sustained restructuring effort at Linda Vista Elementary School in San Diego, California. Linda Vista is an inner city school in the San Diego Unified School District serving approximately 1000 students on two campuses about one-half mile apart. Although the program is nongraded, the main campus houses what is traditionally known as grades 1-6, while the satellite campus serves the early childhood center (pre-K, K and some grade 1). The Linda Vista area of San Diego has traditionally been the most culturally diverse in the city and has undergone numerous changes. Through the 1960s and early 1970s the area was home to roughly equal numbers of African-American, white, and Hispanic families. In the early 1970s, with a large influx of Southeast Asian refugees, Southeast Asian enrollment at Linda Vista peaked near 70 percent. Recently, the number of Hispanics moving into the area has risen. Currently, Linda Vista's enrollment is 37 percent Asian, 45 percent Hispanic, 8 percent African American, and 10 percent white. More than 94 percent of its students receive free and reduced-priced lunch, making the school eligible for schoolwide Chapter 1 funding (now known as Title I). At least 77 percent of the students are non- or limited-English proficient. In this diverse population, five major languages are spoken: Hmong, Lao, Vietnamese, Spanish and English. Students from newly arrived immigrant or refugee families, often with no previous exposure to formal education, form the majority of Linda Vista's student population.

The author came to Linda Vista with an extensive background in second language acquisition and bilingual education. At that time, the reform movement was not widely known or advocated. Since the San Diego Unified School District was just beginning its process of change, past personal leadership and pioneering experiences were relied upon to inspire the staff to change. An enormous challenge to implement reform was presented to the staff. The challenge meant that they must raise their expectations for all students, raise their own morale above a marginal level, and focus on involving parents where previously there had been almost no involvement.

Throughout this struggle, a personal evolution in thinking took place that brought experience with reform practices and the premises for bilingual instruction together. It became obvious that unlike the experiences during the period of advocacy for bilingual programs where models and recipes were the agenda, school reform is a process of inquiry, decision-making and innovation, all born out of the unique setting in which reform is taking



place. School reform requires ownership of the changes on the part of the school community; ownership that embraces conflict resolution and accountability as healthy processes.

As the outside community began to look at some of the successes in this infant effort, the principal began to reflect upon this unique experience with sustained reform. As a result of this reflection, several broad parameters were discovered that can be identified as reform practices to guide those who would embark upon such an effort. The evolution of this thinking raised an important question about whether anything goes. As Zehler et al. (1994) point out, is the "universal connotation" the overriding solution? In the case of programs for LEP students, is a staff empowered to design a new curriculum, determine student groupings, or decide on any mode of language use? It was found that in any innovative process, there are certain principles which apply. A vision for innovation is created from solid research and practical wisdom. It is derived from a belief system that has the welfare of and a high level of achievement for all students as its goal, regardless of economic status, race, or linguistic differences.

To include programs for language minority students, based on a framework that incorporates research, practical wisdom and a nonbiased belief system, any schoolwide reform process must be based on certain understandings. Principally, educators planning these innovations need to understand the underlying assumptions governing second language acquisition in our sociocultural environment. The following premises for dual language programs are based on extensive research and practical wisdom (Miramontes, Nadeau, and Commins, In Press).

Pedagogical Premises that Apply to Programs for LEP Students

1. Knowledge is best acquired when learners actively participate in meaningful activities that are developmentally appropriate.

Rationale: Learning is not a piecemeal, behavioristic process, but an internal response to experiences. The individual derives meaning from outside input when it is presented as an integrated whole and relates to his or her own experiences (Piaget, 1969).

2. The more comprehensive the use of the primary language, the greater the potential to maximize the linguistically diverse student's academic achievement. Even though circumstances may limit the school's capability to fully develop a student's primary language, there are always ways to nurture it.



Rationale: Language is an important vehicle for thinking (Vygotsky, 1978). The more solid the foundation in the primary language the greater the chances of academic achievement in the second language (Cummins, 1979).

3. There is a distinction between developing the primary language as a foundation for thinking and learning, and using the primary language as a crutch for learning English.
4. Second language development creates an added dimension to instructional decision making. Instruction must reflect specific strategies designed to meet the needs of students who are developing second language proficiency (Spener, 1991).
5. Second language instruction must be organized to provide students the time, experiences and opportunities they need to fully develop language across a range of social and academic contexts.

Rationale: Language is not learned for language's sake. It is a vehicle for thinking, for communication and for cultural transmission. Therefore, language is learned in the context of these experiences (Halliday, 1975).

6. In order to develop bilingual academic proficiency, clear, separate, and meaning-enriched contexts for each language must be created during instructional time.
7. Decisions regarding transition to formal second language reading and redesignations for program exit criteria cannot be made arbitrarily.

Rationale: Predictors for academic success in English must be assessed developmentally. A multifaceted approach that looks at primary language development, and English language proficiency, as well as other predictors, should be followed (Nadeau and Miramontes, 1988).

8. Direct oral language and comprehension support must accompany beginning English literacy and the expansion of English content instruction. (Nadeau and Miramontes, 1988).
9. Instructional assessment must be based on the student's first and second language levels rather than on grade level or predetermined criteria. An appropriate assessment plan should address language and literacy development as well as content knowledge.



10. Parents and the community need to play a major role in the learning and schooling of their children.

Rationale: Academic achievement is known to improve when families are involved in their children's education (Brandt, 1989).

11. Instruction must be organized to help students understand and respect themselves and their own culture as well as the culture of the broader society. Planned cross-cultural interactions are an essential component of programs for all students.
12. Sociocultural factors and the political context must be considered in making decisions regarding every aspect of program planning.

Rationale: Sociocultural factors such as language status, socioeconomic level, and teacher expectations can have a direct impact on educational opportunities, the development of bilingualism, and student achievement (McDermott, 1976).

13. Teachers are decision makers, and as part of a learning community they are responsible for all aspects of the instructional program for linguistically diverse students.

© *Basic Premises*, Miramontes, Nadeau and Commins, In Press.

Identifiable Reform Practices

Drawing from the author's experiences with a sustained reform effort, and current research, it is apparent that the issue of reform must be discussed without using the word replication! So much of the experience and research in reform, thus far, tells us that the process is unique to each setting. In fact, if there is one overriding principle, it is that systemic reform proceeds from the roots of the system and continually affects the entire system. In our anxiety to push the reform scale up, the tendency is to revert to recipes, school improvement notions and prescriptions. However, it is possible to avoid prescriptions as we recognize parameters for reform in education that might guide us through the process of change. The process is holistic. The parameters are to be viewed as working together. No one parameter standing alone constitutes a reform process.

Following are a description and discussion of some broad parameters that have evolved from the author's own experience with a sustained reform effort, and from her experience in



working with other educators involved with successful school innovations around the country. These include: decision making, teaching and learning, organization, assessment and accountability. An example of each practice from the author's experience at Linda Vista School is presented to contextualize each parameter.

Decision making

In the decision making process of a change effort, the school organization is inquiry-based. Members of the school community are involved in continued inquiry, questioning and self-assessment. In this system, conflict resolution is healthy, but most discussions are about students, not about the needs of adults. However, the growth of students as well as of the adults is seen as developmental. Both must be taken from where they are in a process of continuous growth.

Governance in this organization means that all stakeholders are involved, and not merely by representation. Involvement signifies not just power shifts, but a substantive investment in all aspects of the change process. There are very few hierarchies in this system; thus, parents, classified staff, and teaching staff think and talk about curriculum, instruction and other important issues related to school change.

After a thorough process of discussion and inquiry, decisions are made through consensus. It is not a linear endeavor, but one that requires constant inquiry, assessment and decision making. Members of the reform organization make their decisions in cross- collaborative teams, not only within their own cohort groups. Primary teachers will meet with upper-level teachers, classified staff with teachers, parents and business partners with each of these groups.

Example

The governance structure at Linda Vista school evolved from an established vision and from the creation of an innovative program whose primary purpose was to benefit children. *The experience begets the process.* That is, by focusing on students and by jumping in full force, people learned by doing. The infrastructure and programs needed to support the reform effort evolved from the collaborative experience of creating new solutions.

The following is an example of the inquiry process established at this school: A schoolwide portfolio assessment process had been established by the fourth year into the restructuring. A staff development day brought the entire staff together to participate in a protocol that required the teachers to form groups throughout the day to analyze the student portfolios across levels. Discussions were held related to the examination of student work, adjustments in the anchor papers, and revisions of the rubrics the staff had previously developed. Classified staff acted as reflectors during each session providing feedback to the teachers regarding both content and processes. This activity exemplifies a decision making process that achieved not only a trusting involvement of all staff, but also a focus on accountability and improvement for the sake of the students. Ultimately, parents were also involved in these activities, but as stated earlier, because these mostly non-English speaking parents were unfamiliar with this level of decision making, a developmental approach was taken until they felt comfortable and competent in such discussions. *Learning is a developmental process for adults as well as children.*

Teaching and learning

Fundamental change in how teaching and learning are conceptualized is apparent in a progressive organization. The learner is at the center of the process and is held accountable, but this accountability is born out of an environment that asks students to continually assess their own progress. Standards for achievement are apparent to students at all times. The curriculum has continual application to the real world and takes a world perspective. This student-centered instructional program leads ultimately to a process of assessment that is dramatically different from the traditional.

A major paradigm shift is called for. What will insure that all students--at-risk, LEP, special education--are reaching high standards? This is murky water since educators are forced to look critically at all of the traditional gatekeeping practices that prevent or camouflage whether all students are learning to high standards or even have the opportunity to do so. The graded system, norm-referenced tests, grades, rankings, are all forms of classification that assume all students fall into prescribed levels or that place them at a point on a normal curve. These basic assumptions are in and of themselves, barriers to continuous progress. A system of failure has been set up at the outset for many students, particularly students who may be at-risk, who come to school speaking a language other than English, or who have had very little formal education. If expectations are established more on the basis of arbitrary grade levels



or rankings, than on clear standards of achievement set for all students, then these students are often categorized as poor learners and remain at the lower levels of expectation.

Example

At Linda Vista, the concept of continuous progress became the umbrella under which all instruction and assessment were subsumed. Consequently, a non-graded program was instituted. Learning was seen as developmental with student progress monitored on a continuous basis as an individual process. As such, the instructional program was offered to students who were grouped in four age groupings rather than by grade level—Early Childhood, Primary, Middle, and Upper. Within each of the age groupings there were as many as six levels of English language proficiency. The Southeast Asian students were in a sheltered English program and the Hispanic students in a full bilingual program. While the Asian students received social studies through their primary language, the Hispanic students were instructed through their primary language in all of the basic subjects while they learned English. Continuous progress was embedded in the instructional program since students were allowed to move up through the levels as soon as they demonstrated that they had met the curriculum standards set by the staff (see section on assessment).

Once the school community was committed to a continuous progress, standards-based curriculum, the impact on classroom instruction and on expectations for student success was dramatic. The gates that were previously locked because of deficit thinking, tracking, and the prescription mentality were slowly opened. Student learning was viewed developmentally with the assumption that all students would meet the high standards set by the staff. If any residue remains of the low-expectation paradigm, it is impossible for it to take root since the new program was instituted schoolwide and, as the reader will note, other important practices began to work in conjunction with the new framework for teaching and learning.

Organization

In a school whose vision calls for high standards for all students, organizational flexibility becomes imperative. Changes in organization must be visible and allow for flexibility in staffing, resources and services. Traditional, graded, compartmentalized systems are based on the belief, albeit insidious, that students learn in prescribed sequences regardless of need, socio-economic background, learning styles, linguistic differences or disabilities. Expectations are built into the system for students to reach these prescribed levels at predetermined times. Thus, the student becomes a secondary focus, and the central goal becomes the grade-level expectation, test scores, and ranks. When the attempt is made to fit students into compartmentalized systems, superficial curriculum or "teaching to the test" is often the result. Redesigning such structures as how students are grouped for instruction, how they move up the continuum of learning, and how the flexibility of movement throughout the school day is achieved are but a few aspects to be considered when designing a vision for educational change.



Again, this portrait of educational reform is to be viewed holistically. A school may have an innovative instructional program or assessment system, but if student grouping, equity of services, or staffing arrangements are highly traditional and rigid, then the innovative practices may be constrained. Raising expectations for students by designing challenging standards for all may not have a chance to flourish if these expectations and standards exist within a gatekeeping organization.

Example

There are many instances of organizational change that were instituted at Linda Vista. The most significant ones will be discussed, but they must be viewed holistically. No one change in organizational practice or unrelated changes will promote and support the foundation for true reform. The Linda Vista staff recognized, early on, that merely deciding to implement a nongraded program without also introducing organizational flexibility would not allow a break from the insidious deficit mind-set. Consequently, it was decided that students could move up the levels of language proficiency at any time they were deemed ready according to the school's standards and assessment process. In order to do this, a whole set of organizational changes had to be implemented. Class size had to be reduced to allow for sufficient room for students to move in and out of levels. Thus, dramatic staffing changes had to be negotiated requiring reallocation of resources to obtain several part-time teachers for the morning program. The focus for class size reduction was not on achieving equality across classes, but rather on meeting specific student needs. For example, an entry level class designed for non-English speaking students, was kept at below 20 students, whereas other classes might be larger.

The commitment to offer primary language instruction at whatever level possible led to the creative assignment of two Southeast Asian teachers. Had the two teachers been assigned to regular classrooms, they would have been able to serve only the group of students in their classes. The decision that coincided with the vision for first language development was to assign these teachers to lead a cadre of primary language instructors that would rotate on a daily schedule and provide the instruction to students who were regrouped by their primary language. The entire morning schedule had to be arranged to accommodate this program, requiring the commitment of the entire staff. These are but a few examples of the organizational changes that were required in order to realize the vision.

Assessment and Accountability

A state and national vision that strives to help the educational community set high standards for all students, regardless of race, language, disability or socio-economic status (SES), is without question, a goal that educators and families must embrace. But what the school does with those standards is crucial. Unless the school has its own internal mechanism for assessment and accountability based on the external criteria, the goal of high achievement for all students may fail.

Probably one of the most significant identifiable reform practices is the assessment and accountability process a school has undertaken. A key factor in this process is the alignment



of curriculum, instruction, assessment and, ultimately, performance evaluations. Internal to the school is an assessment system whose purpose is not only to assess student progress, but also to continually reevaluate the school's capacity to help all students reach high standards.

Through a continuous progress mode, assessments must measure authentic work of students and involve them and their parents in the process. Such an internal mechanism may lead to continuous improvement in which all staff have an opportunity to examine student work across levels--not just their own students'--with the purpose of continually reevaluating not only student progress, but the assessment practices as well.

Performance assessment is an individual process. Unlike traditional forms of assessment that force placement of students in ranks, along a curve or in a graded system, it evaluates the student's progress along his or her own developmental path. Students begin taking responsibility for their own learning by being intimately involved in the assessment process.

Linked very closely to the schoolwide assessment practices is the accountability challenge. Schools going through the reforming process are facing the dilemma of being held accountable for improvements in student achievement through standardized test results while being encouraged to move into authentic and performance-based assessments. Consequently, the challenge for schools is to learn how to develop program evaluations that incorporate indicators such as those provided by portfolio assessment. An added challenge is how to extrapolate authentic assessment data to provide accountability information to the public, parents and other agencies. Can school personnel and their communities learn how to link norm-referenced data and performance-based assessments, and make sense of the information in a way that will give legitimacy to the data?



Example

One of the most significant changes that occurred at Linda Vista was the evolution of a schoolwide assessment system. The evolution took place as a result of the vision that had as its goal the high-level achievement of all students through a developmentally appropriate, continuous progress teaching and learning process. As we said at Linda Vista, *the experience begets the process*. It was inevitable that an alternative assessment process would evolve from the staff's commitment to continuous progress. The following steps were taken:

- Step 1: The staff embarked upon the task of developing language arts standards for all of the age grouping and language proficiency levels in the instructional design. This task emerged as the logical starting point since 77 percent of the students were English language learners. Subsequently, math standards were also developed. Although the goals set for all students were based on California state frameworks and district expectations, benchmarks along the way were targeted in the school's assessment design. For example, learner outcomes for the non-English speaking student or the student transitioning into formal English reading were delineated to maintain ongoing monitoring of student progress.
- Step 2: Maintaining portfolios for each student was the method chosen for assessing whether students reached the standards. This would be a school-wide expectation with the appropriate portfolio contents outlined in the assessment document for each level.
- Step 3: Rubrics were then developed as a scale of descriptors for all student work. These were designed around the developmental levels: Early Childhood, Primary, Middle and Upper. No grades, numbers, or scale rankings were used.
- Step 4: The standard district progress report was changed to reflect the continuous progress design. On the report, rubrics were checked for each reporting period. The report was accompanied by a hard copy of the student's portfolio that contained the appropriate work for the quarter. Each piece of work had an assigned rubric and the teacher decided, often with student input, the final rubric for the progress report. A hard copy was given to the parents since all portfolio work was scanned and stored electronically. To exemplify the change in thinking about assessment and learning, the new progress report was called, *The Growth Record*.
- Step 5: Teacher and administrator evaluations began to reflect the standards for student achievement designed by the staff. Schoolwide data were then extrapolated from the portfolio assessment for reporting to the district and to the State School Report Card.

At the time the author left Linda Vista School, the staff was prepared to balance existing norm-referenced testing with the data resulting from the schoolwide standards-based assessment. They had matured in their thinking so that they were willing to take a broader view of accountability. They had begun to take a multifaceted approach and put the traditional data in its proper place. The continuing struggle is to make some reasonable connections between the results of the two types of assessment, in a way that does not undermine the standards-based approach.



Recommendations

The following are recommendations to the practitioner that suggest a perspective on reform practices within the context of the basic premises for dual language instruction. These factors should be viewed as a whole and together drive the vision for instructional planning and design. The recommendations are:

1. In order to examine all aspects of a proposed vision, a necessary step is to analyze the beliefs that people hold about learning, languages and cultures.
2. School staffs must first learn how to make good decisions given their own context.
3. Decisions must be based on a schoolwide vision and the premises for dual language instruction.
4. Models for educational programs provided from outside the school do not instill the necessary ownership required to sustain a change process.
5. Assessment practices are what drive the organization and unless the school embraces its own continuous progress system, the members of the school community will not hold themselves accountable for students' academic achievement.
6. In the initial stages of hammering out a vision, the entire staff must be at the table. Parent voices must be heard in a variety of ways. Traditional representative groups may not reflect all parental views. Many alternative approaches for soliciting the input of all stakeholders may be needed.

Conclusion

The reform agenda in education and the practical wisdom and research related to the instruction of language minority students need to come together to form a comprehensive agenda. This paper provides several identifiable reform practices from the author's personal and extensive experience in leading a major reform effort. The premises for dual language instruction have also been interwoven into the argument. With these concrete examples from personal experience the reader may conclude that given these two intersecting factors, (practices and premises), wise decisions can be made -- decisions that are systemic, visionary, involve all stakeholders and ensure high standards for all students. The decisions, however,



must take into account appropriate pedagogy, assessment and socio-cultural factors related to the instruction of linguistically diverse students.

Without question, the conversation about educational change has taken on a very different perspective. The conversation now speaks to high standards for all students, to inclusiveness of instruction, to equity and access of resources, and to direct family involvement in the decisions of the school. The next step is to push the envelope of action to the next level where a true examination of practices takes place that will finally ensure success for all students.

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